DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 373 620 HE 027 606

AUTHOR Sachs, Judyth
TITLE Control or Empowerment: Quality in Higher Education in Australia. AIR 1994 Annual Forum Paper.
PUB DATE May 94
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Forum of the Association for Institutional Research (34th, New Orleans, LA, May 29-June 1 1994). A version of this paper presented at the Australian Association for Institutional Research Conference (Sydney, New South Wales, Australia, September 1993).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Accountability; College Role; Educational Assessment; *Educational Quality; Foreign Countries; Government Role; *Higher Education; Individual Development; Organizational Development; Politics of Education; Program Descriptions; Public Policy; Quality Control
IDENTIFIERS *AIR Forum; Australia; *Griffith University (Australia); Stakeholders

ABSTRACT

This paper clarifies the problems of meaning and translation into practice of concepts of "quality" in higher education by examining a quality improvement program at Griffith University (Queensland, Australia). The paper notes that Australian government agencies have advanced a quality assurance (QA) approach concerned with the imposition of externally defined versions of what universities stand for and of their contribution to the economic enhancement of the states, an approach which may not be in the best long term interests of the groups inside or outside the universities. The paper describes an alternative approach, the quality improvement (QI) model which emphasizes individual and corporate development and which satisfies the needs of various internal stakeholders and takes into account the external pressures of accountability inherent in QA. A description of the QI project at Griffith University shows how it is trying to bridge the gap between external accountability and internal transformation. By working within specific sites inside the University, the project aims at the internationalization of a culture that values quality in all of its variant forms and the development of a quality driven institutional culture across the University. Contains 12 references. (JB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 373 620

Control or Empowerment: Quality in Higher Education in Australia

Judyth Sachs

Griffith University, Queensland

Australia

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

AIR

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Paper Presented at the Association for Institutional Research Forum, New Orleans, May 1994

HE 027 606

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

for Management Research, Policy Analysis, and Planning

This paper was presented at the Thirty-Fourth Annual Forum of the Association for Institutional Research held at The New Orleans Marriott, New Orleans, Louisiana, May 29, 1994 - June 1, 1994. This paper was reviewed by the AIR Forum Publications Committee and was judged to be of high quality and of interest to others concerned with the research of higher education. It has therefore been selected to be included in the ERIC Collection of Forum Papers.

Jean Endo
Editor
Forum Publications

Control or Empowerment: The Practice of Quality in Higher Education in Australia[1]

Two versions of quality are dominating the policy discourse of higher education in Australia. Policies emanating from the Federal Government's Department of Education and Training (DEET) advocate quality assurance (QA) as the preferred mode for public accountability in higher education, while within some universities the response to quality has been through the implementation of quality improvement (QI) strategies, where the emphasis is on individual and corporate development.

In this paper it is suggested that quality is an elusive concept in both the theoretical literature and in policy documents informing current higher education policy initiatives in Australia. However, three types of definitions are to be found within policy documents which guide higher education institutional practice and policies; the pragmatic, the relative and the glib.

The Federal Government, through its policy documents, discussion papers and current initiatives, has endorsed QA as the means for achieving quality in higher education. The project at Griffith University (GU) described in this paper is concerned with developing QI strategies at the sub-faculty level. The project is based on the assumption that QI provides the vehicle for a transformative approach to development and improvement within universities concerned as it is with the specific needs and requirements of the various units within the university rather than the externally imposed strictures of QA.

In order to support this position some assumptions underlying quality assurance and quality improvement as they currently exist within the context of higher education are presented. Drawing on the experience of a QI project at Griffith University, evidence to support the claim that the external demands of accountability evident within much of the policy discourse and deliberations of higher education can be met through QI is presented.

Quality as an Elusive Concept

While quality has become a new force for accountability within higher education, there is little agreement as to what "quality" means or how it might actually manifest itself in the organisation and practices of higher education institutions. As Cullen (1992) quite rightly claims quality in a university is an elusive concept.

Compounding the conceptual difficulty is the view contained in the Higher Education Committee (HEC) document '*Achieving Quality*' which states quite categorically that 'Discussions about the quality of higher education start from the premise that no single, workable 'definition' about quality is possible; that quality in higher education is not a definable concept.' (p. 6) Nevertheless, attempts have been made to come to grips with the concept in ways which have been helpful, while in others obfuscatory. Cullen (1992, p.5) again provides some assistance in identifying the diversity of the concept of quality:

> Quality can mean some normative view of excellence, it can mean a lack of dysfunctions in the academic machine, it can mean orderly inputs and processes, it can mean status relative to colleagues in research and publication, it can mean the quality of the best students and their suitability for higher studies, it can mean the maintenance of skills and standards that suit various employers and professional groups, and it can mean teaching

---

[1] A version of this paper was presented at the Australian Association for Institutional Research Conference in Sydney in September 1993

> excellence in terms of knowledge added to students participating in programs. It can be generalised from programs to the overall activities of an institution or to a state or national system.
>
> (Cullen, 1992. p. 5)

The conceptualisation and implementation of 'quality' as presented in Australian higher education policy documents is problematic. There is no definitive position regarding its meaning or its application to higher education settings. In what follows it is argued that the concept of 'quality' is inherently political and serves the interests of the state rather than the individual needs of universities themselves.

Quality: The Politics of Definition

The issue of quality in higher education is essentially political, and becomes a site for struggle over competing ideological perspectives serving different personal and institutional agendas and interests. As Vroeijentijn (1990, p. 23) argues, 'the interpretation of the concept of quality depends on the person who sets the objectives'. There are various interested parties, each of whom defines quality in accordance with the objectives set by themselves. These may run parallel, but can also be conflicting. The debate over quality in higher education then, should be seen for what it is: a power struggle where the use of terms reflects a jockeying for position in the attempt to impose own definitions of quality'. (Barnett, 1992, p. 6) The current debate within higher education regarding quality has focussed significant public attention on what is actually happening within universities with the view to making these institutions more publicly accountable. This public scrutiny may well be seen as encouraging and signifying a cultural shift in terms of how quality is conceptualised. The effect of this is not inconsiderable for, if as Lindsay (1992, p. 161) suggests, "quality" is to be interpreted narrowly or simply used as a tool to pursue a less welcome goal, then it represents a confusing and dangerous development. He observes that 'unfortunately, some signs point to the latter.' What is becoming apparent is that competing models are being promoted by different interest groups, each of which has its own ideas as to what constitutes quality and how to measure it. Universities also have to satisfy the multiple and competing demands of external stakeholders while at the same time maintaining their own particularistic and unique needs and goals. In practice this means that centralised bureaucracies have a view of quality that is concerned with satisfying the demands of external accountability. There is some confusion and conflict within the policy documents themselves about this position.

Three types of definitions of quality are evident within higher education policy documents concerned with quality; the pragmatic, the relative and the glib. Versions of these definitions are to be found in various forms within higher education policy documents in Australia. Each of these is now presented briefly.

The Pragmatic

The pragmatic definition acknowledges the conceptual difficulties of the concept, maintaining that 'any precise definition of quality would inevitably be narrow and prescriptive leading to a kind of uniformity inimical to an innovative and diverse system responding in a variety of ways to a variety of expressed community needs' (AVCC, 1992, p. 68). Such definitions provide the latitude for contextual and individual institutional variation, while at the same time providing little guidance for implementation of quality outcomes or strategies to achieve quality. Given the current political climate within Australian higher education where universities are expected to do more with less resources, while at the same time be able to demonstrate excellence, it is perhaps not surprising that the Australian Vice Chancellors Committee (AVCC) has taken a pragmatic stance supporting a pluralistic and competitive view of 'quality'.

The Relative

The relative approach, as the name suggests, takes the position that quality is seen as relative to the user of the term and the circumstances in which its is invoked. It means different things to different people. As Barnett (1992, p. 48) notes, from this perspective there are no absolute criteria by which we can assess either thought or action. This position is exemplified in Minister Baldwin's (1991) policy statement *Higher Education: Quality and Diversity in the 1990's.* Here the position is that:

> It is for institutions to determine their mission, to define what they mean by quality and standards of performance against their own objectives, and to identify and to provide the evidence necessary for them to gauge their success and satisfy their various stakeholders' (p. 31).

Like the pragmatic definition, this position supports diversity of form but demands that outcomes be demonstrated by indicators that are context specific. However, what remains silent is on what grounds institutions are to be compared in a political climate of diminishing resources and a competitive marketplace.

The Glib

The glib approach likens quality to almost everything that cannot readily be defined (HEC 1991). Vroeijenstijn (1992) provides one of the best examples of this positions. For Vroeijenstijn (1992, p. 112):

> ...quality is like love. Everybody talks about it and everybody knows what s/he is talking about. Everybody knows and feels when there is love. But when we try to give a definition of it, we are standing with empty hands.

Interestingly, a version of this quote is to be found in the HEC (1991) paper *The Quality of Higher Education* .

It is obvious that within policy documents in Australia there has been a concerted move to promote a diversity of approaches to the problem of the definition of 'quality'. There are both strengths and weaknesses to this position. On the one hand it enables institutions to set their own context specific goals and objectives, and in so doing to reflect their uniqueness. On the other hand it makes it difficult to provide bench marks against which institutions can be compared and through which funds can be allocated.

The problem of definition has been more adequately resolved within the scholarly literature. Harvey and Green (1993: p. 28) for example suggest that 'At best we should define as clearly as possible the criteria that each stakeholder uses when judging quality and for these competing views to be taken into account when assessments of quality are undertaken.' Pratt (1993:p. 5) takes an even more pragmatic view maintaining that:

> 'Higher Education scarcely needs more definitions of quality, criteria, questionnaires and three year projects. What is required is that academics should know what they are doing, understand the value of it and do it as well as may be - together with apt institutional means for making this overt'

While there may be some advantages in making the preferred definition of 'quality' explicit so that instrumental needs may be achieved some more significant silences may well emerge. To this end crucial questions such as what are the assumptions underlying the various approaches to quality?, whose interests do these approaches serve? and, what are the unintended consequences of the various versions of quality? remain unaddressed

In what follows the distinctions between the two competing models of QA and QI are presented

Two Competing Models of Quality

Within public debates, policy discourses and institutional practices two competing models of quality the instrumental (QA) and the transformative (QI) are evident. The instrumentalist position of federal government policy discourse exemplifies what Barnett (1992) describes as the technicist voice which in its more severe form is concerned with increased externally driven accountability. The pressure for external accountability has emerged because as Green (1993) argues existing quality assurance arrangements have failed. The challenge facing universities then is to respond to these externally driven demands for accountability while at the same time to promote and develop internal quality improvement.

Within a QA framework quality is treated as a synonym for "performance". It is concerned with the imposition of technical instruments, such as performance indicators to measure input and output of educational spending and resources. This view of quality validates the use of quantitative measures such as the numbers of graduates, the number of post-graduate students, research income and so on as indicators of performance. It takes as its point of departure the values and interests of the external world, both as to the purpose of higher education and as to the means by which quality ought to be assessed and improved (Barnett, 1992). The Committee for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (CQAHE) now about to make its second round of visitations to universities across the country have used, and will more than likely continue to use such measures in its deliberations regarding the allocation of reward funds.

Quality Assurance vs Quality Improvement

As Table 1 shows, there is conceptual distance between the purposes of QA and those of QI. The two dominant perspectives on quality in higher education differ in many respects. The instrumentalists promote the view that quality can be measured so long as the 'right' instruments are developed. There is an over emphasis on obtaining results from the measurement of inputs and outputs, with no attempt to understand the processes that underlie the system. This in turn provides the basis for identifying current deficiencies and for rewarding 'good practice', what ever that might mean. Primarily it is an external practice in which external agencies find ways of forming opinions and judgements about the activities of the institution. This viewpoint is built around an assessment of an institution's past performance and is circumscribed by economic indicators. Consequently it is concerned with documenting the past instead of providing the basis for future policy planning and activity.

	Quality Assurance	Quality Improvement
Focus	accountability	improvement
Philosophy	instrumental	transformative
Locus of Control	external management/government driven	internal driven by employees
Motive	government directives/policies	organisation's desire for improvement
Social Relations	competitive directive	collegial negotiated
Management Style	authoritarian	consensual
Administrative Structures	centralised/bureaucratic	devolved/facilitative
Time	short-term	longer term
Evaluation	external audit	peer review
Audience	external stakeholders	internal stakeholders
Orientation	past practice	future possibility
Indicators of Success	qualitative	quantitative

Table 1
Quality Assurance and Quality Improvement Compared

Several issues emerge as being of concern as a result of the preference exhibited by bureaucrats for the instrumentalist QA model. First, the autonomy of the academy comes into question insofar as instrumentalist approaches make it all too easy for political interference and manipulation at all levels. Second, universities which once prided themselves on their independence and their ability to provide an external voice of critique may well find themselves silenced by the possibility of punitive resourcing actions. Third, the Australian university system which has credited itself on its diversity may well find itself under greater centralised control, not only in terms of resource allocation and programme profile but also in terms of more stringent forms of externally mandated accountability. The current situation is such that it is politically naive for institutions not to develop quality management plans and to respond to externally mandated pressures. As Lindsay (1992, p. 162) observes 'While focussing more attention on important core issues in higher education, the "quality debate" regrettably has not generated a conceptually sophisticated and innovative attack on the elusive notion of quality in higher education'.

While the above position has been a powerful force in directing the activities of universities, internally driven approaches which are closer to the needs and interests of the University itself are also evident. A transformative and developmental view of quality is evident. within some universities. This orientation breaks from the bureaucratically imposed QA model by giving at least equal emphasis to the imponderable elements of our conceptions of educational processes and outcomes, and their dependence on value judgements (Lindsay 1992 p. 154). This model is concerned with quality improvement. It is transformative in that it is concerned with improving and developing practice through peer review, and enhancing the perspectives and interests of the university internally; and it is based on the assumption that the

experiences of all participants must be enhanced. This view of quality bars any outside voices dominating the activities as they relate to quality within the university, and empowers the participants by giving them the opportunity to influence their own transformation. Such a paradigm shift is at the core of the activities of the project on QI within Griffith University.

In summary, on the one hand, QA is directed towards proving the value, worth or excellence of a particular object, issue, programme or set of activities. On the other hand, QI is directed towards identifying areas for improvement, as they relate to issues, programmes, processes or sets of activities. With this conceptual distance, it would appear at first glance, that there is little capacity to bring these two competing models into a useful relationship. Nevertheless, the Griffith University project has demonstrated that it is possible to make the two processes complementary. Accordingly, if the QI process begins with the mapping of areas for improvement, it is then possible to integrate that mapping process through the identification and documentation of strengths. This documentation serves as the basis for evidence to assure stakeholders and other audiences that the excellence of outcomes achieved is possible. Running parallel to this are the quality improvement processes. In this context, while QA and QI may be uncomfortable bedfellows, they are able to be brought together in a practical partnership.

The Quality Management at the Sub-Faculty Level Project

In early 1993 funding was received through the National Priority (Reserve) Fund: Quality Section to implement a project entitled Processes for Quality Management at the Sub-faculty level. The initial proposal was based on the premise that models of quality assurance currently applied within business and commercial sectors are inappropriate for use in higher education. Within the context of this project quality in higher education is concerned with providing a learning context in which students experience success, teaching which responds to a variety of needs and the development of academic programmes which provide leadership in new fields of knowledge and skills.

The Model for Quality Improvement

The model for quality improvement that emerged from the project consists of three distinct but complementary phases which are reflected across the whole project as well as each of the sub-projects. The plan-do-check-act quality improvement cycle provided the overarching process by which the projects were implemented. Phase one was one of conceptualisation and preparation. The purpose of this phase was to develop knowledge and a theoretical understanding of Quality as it exists within various contexts and its variant forms of application. This provided a conceptual foundation for both project leaders and participants in the implementation of the projects. The form, content and plan for action of each of the sub projects was negotiated and developed with the team members. Phase two of the model was concerned with implementing the action plans. During this phase the projects were carefully documented and a series of 'quality improvement principles' emerged which would provide the basis for generalisation and extrapolation across other contexts. Phase three involved reflection on the processes and outcomes of each of the projects. This was achieved through input from two sources; one involved the reflections of the project teams and the identification of areas for improvement, while the other source was an external evaluation which was built into the original project proposal. In this way the demands of external accountability were used to complement the quality improvement orientation of the project.

The overall project is premised on the following operational principles. First, the need to take into account the national pressures of quality in higher education and that sub-faculty activities had to be embedded within the institutional culture of Griffith. Accordingly, in enacting the project its processes had to be designed to be contextually

acceptable and to complement existing institutional practices. Second, any initiative at the sub-faculty level should have an explicit relationship with both the particular faculty and the University Mission, values, goals and objectives. Third, the staff of the sub-faculty groups who have committed themselves to the project must be responsible for the planning, implementation and evaluation of their sub-projects. In keeping with this, the role of the project team should be supportive but facilitative rather than controlling. Fourth the focus within each sub-faculty group should be on the enhancement of, or change to existing knowledge and practice rather than the application of traditional methods used by business for quality assurance. Finally, the project adopts a developmental orientation which is reflected in all of its practices, rather than a technical rationalist approach which is characterised by a heavy reliance on hard appraisal processes, and through which change is bureaucratically mandated and imposed.

Each of the projects is concerned with the development of a 'quality culture' which is to be internalised into all aspects of faculty life and enacted across all academic and administrative practices and procedures. The QI projects were located within the following faculties: Education and the Arts (EDA), Engineering and Environmental Sciences (ENS) and the Queensland College of Art (QCA).

The project within EDA was concerned with improving the quality of teacher education through the development of stronger links between professional experiences and academic studies leading to a better understanding of the work of teaching itself. The project was also concerned with developing a programme which is distinctive from other teacher education programmes in Queensland through a school linked internship. Arising from this was another outcome, namely to enhance the University's reputation so that "quality" entrants will be attracted to this programme and "quality" supervising teachers and faculty staff to participate in the linked programme.

ENS was concerned with examining the effectiveness and appropriateness of the model of the Graduate School of Environmental Sciences and Engineering. The Graduate School was the first to be established at GU. Its goal is to be pre-eminent in teaching and research. Since its establishment in 1991 there has been a major increase in the numbers of programme offerings from 7 to 11, a doubling of 4 to 8 in the course work area, and an increase in the total number of post-graduate students from 99 in to 1991 to 305 in 1993.

The overarching aim of the project was to collect information which provides Faculty input for the external review of the structure and function of the Graduate School. To this end, the project had the following purposes: first, to identify the nature of the model itself; second, to ascertain the 'goodness of fit' between the initial aims as established in 1991 and the current operation of the Graduate School; third, to investigate how the model or concept of the Graduate School is perceived and experienced by various stakeholders; and finally, to identify the cost of the Graduate School to the Faculty in terms of resource allocation..

The Queensland College of Art was originally part of the Technical and further Education (TAFE) sector. The amalgamation of QCA into Griffith has required a major shift on the part of staff regarding their perceptions of their roles within the larger University. Two projects are located at QCA. The first project concerning image development is addressing the loss of the old 'TAFE culture' with its emphasis on practical and technical knowledge, and at the same time developing a mechanism for externally advertising the QCA. The second project is concerned with developing appropriate procedures for assessment and evaluation in the Creative Arts within a University context.

The Image Development project is concerned with the generation of a publicity brochure. This project has meant that QCA has had to formulate and identify their mission, roles and goals. In particular the project is concerned with the following

activities within the institution:

i. Increased importance being placed on post-graduate education.
ii. The employability of graduates .
iii. A greater balance between teaching, research, and professional activities.

The Image Development project has had as its major outcome the generation of a publicity brochure which will be used to advertise courses offered by QCA. This project has also had. a series of unintended outcomes. In particular a data base has been developed for recording staff, student and alumni professional activities, namely exhibitions, publications, film, video and design projects and consultancies. This information will be used for quality assurance purposes to measure staff and student outcomes.

The Assessment Project has been concerned with a review of existing assessment methods at QCA and the development of a new mechanism to standardise assessment procedures across QCA. The assessment mechanism is based on the identification of criteria by which pieces of work are to be assessed, the allocation of weightings for each criterion and finally the identification of levels of performance (exceptional achievement, high achievement, satisfactory achievement and unsatisfactory achievement) for each of the criterion. This process provides the basis for feedback to students as well as the means by which levels of performance can be translated into grades.

The desired outcomes of this project include the development of:

i. a better understanding of the evaluation of students in an artistic setting;
ii. more efficient assessment strategies;
iii. policies that would maintain consistency and equity of assessment across Artistic Disciplines.

As 1994 was nominated to be a trial year, modifications, adjustments and documentation of the project will be made during the course of the year. In line with its quality improvement focus all full-time academic staff from QCA were invited to participate in half day workshops in order to understand and implement the new assessment mechanism.

Conclusion

This paper has been concerned with clarifying the problem of meaning and translation into practice of the concept of 'quality'. It has been argued that QA, as presented in policy discussion and position papers in higher education, is concerned with the imposition of externally defined versions of what universities stand for and their contribution to the economic enhancement of the state. This, it is suggested, may not be in the best long term interests of the various groups inside and outside of universities. While recognising the political need to endorse and incorporate accountability measures, the position of this paper is that accountability should not be seen as an end in itself. Rather, a view of QI is being promoted which satisfies the needs of the various internal stakeholders, and takes into account the external pressures of accountability inherent within QA. Finally, the need to create a balance between the tension caused by the demands of external accountability as implicit within QA and the context specific elements of QI has been forecast. While recognising the necessity for promoting efficiency and effectiveness, there is a need to avoid duplication in processes for measuring quality because of externally motivated pressures. As Barnett (1992, p. 119) argues 'In higher education, whatever its validity in other contexts, such a single minded checklist approach to safeguarding quality is misguided, ineffective and pernicious.'

The QI project at Griffith University is attempting to bridge the gap between external accountability and internal transformation. By working within specific sites inside the University the project aims at the internalisation of a culture that values quality in all of its variant forms and the development of a quality driven institutional culture across the University. It is anticipated that this will transform individual practice as well as respond to the demands of externally imposed accountability

Bibliography

Baldwin, P. (1991) *Higher Education: Quality and Diversity in the 1990s,* Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra.

Barnett, R. (1992) *Improving Higher Education: Total Quality Care,* The Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press, Buckingham.

Cullen, R. (1992) *Managing Quality in a University Context: what can and should be measured*? Victorian Post-Secondary Education Commission, Melbourne.

Green, D. (1993) *Quality Assurance in Western Europe: Trends, Practices and Issues*, Paper presented at the first Biennial conference and General Conference of the International Network of Quality Assurance in Higher Education, Montreal, Canada, May 24-28 1993

Harvey, L. and Green, D. (1993) Defining Quality, *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 18(1).

Higher Education Council (1990) *Higher Education: The Challenges Ahead,* National Board of Employment, Education and Training, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra.

Higher Education Council (1992) *The Quality of Higher Education*: *Discussion Papers*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra.

Higher Education Council (1992) *Higher Education: Achieving Quality*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra.

Lindsay, A. (1992) Concepts of Quality in Higher Education. *Journal of Tertiary Educational Administration,* 14(2)

Pratt, J. (1993) Editorial, *Higher Educational Review*, 25(2)

Vroeijenstijn, T. (1990) Autonomy or Assurance in quality: Two Sides of the One Coin: The case of quality assessment in Dutch universities, *Higher Education Research and Development* 9(1)

Vroeijenstijn, T. (1992) External Quality Assessment, Servant of Two Masters? The Netherlands University Perspective, in *Quality Assurance in Higher Education,* Falmer Press, Lewes)